Monthly Commentary By Craig Washington

"Another Year In The Life (Of Mine)"

"You remember The Garage? Damn you old!" "Yeah he's always playin some seventies/eighties mix!" "Does it still get hard in the morning?" These subtle comment-questions were presented to me on the occasion of my 38th birthday last year. 2 younger friends (28 and 30 years old respectively) rarely miss an opportunity to remind me of my own aging process. It used to really bother me but I would play it off, not wanting to be perceived as "sensitive" about my age.

I thought about how and why these reminders would sometimes "sting". Was it just my own self-consciousness? Perhaps. I did some self inventory. Have I accomplished the goals I set for myself years ago? I looked at my relationship history and recalled being called a chicken hawk more than once even though I don't predominantly date younger men. Does that mean I am (a)obsessed with boytown, or(b) trying to recapture my youth? It ain't necessarily so but some would beg to differ! When asked my age do I lie, hammer it out or change the subject? No I pretty much tell it plain. Was I one of those "35+" men trying to dress like Usher? Well uh, no, although I have been known to slip on a "muscle" shirt. Like many gay men, I try to look good and I like receiving attention. Like many gay men with AIDS, I like looking healthy and having healthy appetites - sexual and otherwise.

Fact of the matter is (uh-oh!, my father begins declarations like that!)I am relatively okay about approaching the big 40. Given the holocaust of AIDS, one would think that more men of my generation would proudly "own" their ages as badges of distinction. Men who were sexually active in the 80's and survived the odds should be more appreciated by those who were adolescents during that era. Granted many of the latter did not experience massive loss of loved ones (friends, relatives) and extended community (acquaintances,institutions, leaders and celebrities). The current crop of young men may be too burdened with their own survival/sanity issues. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that even a crisis that reshaped many of our priorities would have altered our cultural consciousness about aging. Especially since HIV/AIDS is not the only issue.

While our collective discomfort with aging is by no means gay-exclusive, I believe it is more heightened and pervasive throughout our culture. Our self-esteem and social status is often too dependent upon our looks. While physical appeal can be found among many brothers in their 40's, 50's and beyond, youthful beauty is often seen as the only legit stage of beauty. We are thus concerned about our chances of attracting a mate and how we rate on the social market. Look at the inverse relationship between advancing age and (perceived) diminishing desirability. Many of us don't have children to potentially serve as our future caretakers. Even if we maintain our independence, who will be there to love us? Have you asked yourself how will you locate/create social networks, services and activities that suit your needs as a 40+ or 50+ black sgl person? Many of us measure our self-worth by tangible "output" i.e., labor, capital and such. Will we sustain our sense of usefulness as retirees? Will we be able to stay connected with other men and women in the life? As SGL folks we are often to provide support and companionship. Because of internalized homophobia and lack of social support mechanisms, many men now in their 20's and 30's find it difficult to establish a sense of "community".

For many of you, the aforementioned list of concerns may be far from the uppermost on your mind. However I do think they register with all of us on some level some more conscious than others. The resulting anxiety is at the very core of our resistance to the inevitable natural process of getting older. No wonder we often define youth more as an inherent virtue and not simply a transient condition of life. Rarely do we acknowledge and celebrate our elders who are often barely visible.

In the face of these challenges, I believe we can still alter our ways of thinking about aging. One option I have found useful is mentoring-responsibly providing consistent guidance to a younger person who may or may not be kin. It actually has helped me adjust to my identity as an older man. It highlights the value of my accumulated experience and wisdom. These friendships have also helped me understand my younger brothers and recognize my negative agist attitudes. Some of us already do this and call it something else like being a mother (of course not gender-specific..."house" or otherwise!), father , big brother/"bristah". Talk about this with your friends and watch how the implications of Sex come up. There are certainly those who abuse their role as mentors by having sex with a younger person irresponsibly. I don't believe that adding sex to that mix is always inappropriate but it is often complicated and I generally advise against it. You can also consider/reconsider connecting with a brother or sister in the life who is considerably older. Most of us I suspect are used to kickin' it with our contemporaries -it often seems automatic but it is still a choice. You can choose to be open to building a friendship with that older sister or brother whom you may admire from a distance. You don't know what you may be missing until you try it!

I get so much out of stretching past my comfort zone - not just to be politically correct but to really thrive and grow. Its helping me to continue appreciating who and what I am in a culture that sometimes perceives me as "jurassic". I'm still learning more about myself so I still stumble occasionally but at least I know a lot more than I did 10 yrs ago.

That increased awareness helps me make healthier choices. All things considered I still get anxious about getting older-as Alannis Morrisette sang "I'm brave, but I'm chicken shit." In the meantime I continue to exercise,maintain a decent diet and work the almond facial scrub regularly. I still like to club and when Keith starts playin those classic tracks at Traxx I be havin' spiritual revelations including visitations from long dead dancehall gods and goddesses. I guess I'm just blessed to still be here and I kinda like having been there "backin the day"!

Peace, CW

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